

Transgender Lives & Temporalities: Mediated Cultures & Lived Realities of *Khwaja Siras*

My dissertation project examines discourses of non-normative gender embodiments and sexuality as produced, represented, performed, and contested in the figure of *khwaja sira* in Pakistan. *khwaja siras* have survived as a marginal yet close-knit community of non-normative, gender non-conforming, gender ambiguous, and gender non-binary people of generally low socio-economic status. The community is still entrenched in their own kinship system (teacher-disciple), performance cultures, and traditions that bind them together and help them negotiate their location within Pakistan's dominant gender and social configurations. However, transnational discourses of sexual rights, identity politics, and neoliberal media flows imagine these communities as temporally behind in the first in Euro-America and then elsewhere structure of time requiring the labor of catching up to the ideals of Western "transgender" politics and its attendant fantasy of belonging and being. While the media, NGOs, and CBOs in conjunction with other external and internal forces function to shift the conversations and practices around gender embodiments for those who have access to the sites of mobility and imagination, they often fail to account for the realities and complexities of the majority of *khwaja siras* and their everyday lives. These discourses leave out those on the margins of the margins, those who are poor, uneducated, and with little or no cultural capital. In the media, these subaltern groups are superficially dissected, scrutinized, and objectified for their anatomical differences, sexual tendencies, sex work, and other anomalies. Within the rights discourse, they are represented as victims and their lives, traditions, norms, values, joys, and sorrows are overshadowed by disease and tragedy. This dissertation project is an attempt to highlight these complexities and aims to account for the material, discursive, and institutional location of *khwaja siras* in Pakistan outside the framework of timeliness and belatedness. This project thus seeks to reopen avenues that have been foreclosed by the very discourses deployed to enable them.

My methodological and theoretical approach to this project is interdisciplinary as its scope is to examine mediated cultures and discourses as well as *khwaja siras*' everyday lives. I am employing a combination of textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, and archival research as my methodology. My research on discursive textual and archival sources is already underway. The second component of this project is ethnographic field research with the *khwaja sira* community in Pakistan. I conducted a part of the fieldwork in Karachi in 2017 with the members of a local ethnic *khwaja sira* household. With the help of AIPS short-term research grant, I plan to return for a short (2-3 months during July-September, 2018) follow-up visit to the same household with the possibilities of connecting with their wider network. The second phase of my fieldwork is crucial to substantiate my earlier research. I am hoping that the extended engagement with the community and the fieldwork that the grant would enable will strengthen my dissertation project and enhance my contribution to the areas of critical theory, gender and sexuality studies, and Pakistan studies.